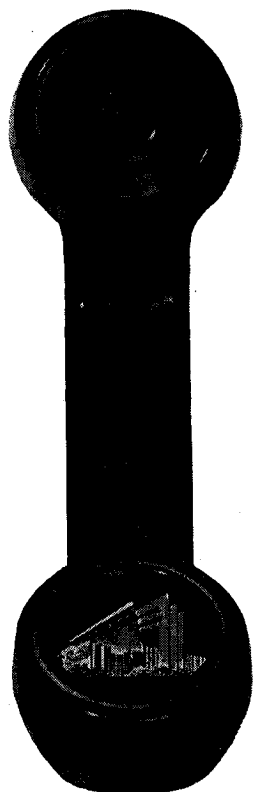


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The Holdout

The Short Short 1 by Jack Ritchie

The intravenous feeding had been completed and the nurses' aides had given him a haircut and a shave. Now he seemed to be sleeping.

I turned to Detective Sergeant Jackson. "Who is he?"

"We don't know yet. He was in pretty bad shape when he was brought in. Kept calling for somebody named Charley."

"How long was he without food?"

"About 30 days, the doctors estimate. Evidently he finally got desperate, broke the attic window and got the attention of one of the gardeners below."

"Why didn't he just walk down?"

"His room was sealed."

"And nobody knew he was up there?"

Jackson smiled tightly. "Somebody had to. It's one of those great big houses set in about five acres of grounds. Belongs to the estate of the late Charles Cooper. The only communication from the room to the outside world was through the dumbwaiter to a locked room below. According to the servants, Charles Cooper himself was the only one who had the key."

The man on the bed stirred slightly and Jackson waited a moment before he continued. "His attic hideaway was nice and cozy. All the comforts of home. But don't get the idea he pampered himself. Far from it. He had what amounted to a miniature gym up there—two sun lamps, a rowing machine, one of those permanently mounted bicycles, a punching bag and every variety of barbell you can mention. Of course, there was one of those wrestlers' mats on the floor, to muffle the sounds when he worked out. There must be 10 years' dried sweat in that mat."

"One of those health nuts, eh?" I ventured.

"Not exactly. There were lots of books around, too—mainly classics. Most of them had been handled so much they were in shreds."

"You can read just so much, though," I said. "I suppose he had a hi-fi, or something like that?"

"No. I guess he didn't want to make any unnecessary noise that might give him away."

The little man's breathing changed and his eyes fluttered open. He stared at us with childlike curiosity and when he spoke, his voice was hardly more than a whisper. "Why didn't Charley send up food and water?"

"Who is Charley?" I asked.

"My cousin. Charley Cooper."

"And who are you?"

"Henry Cooper."

I hesitated a moment and then said, "Your cousin died of a heart attack in Florida two-months ago."

Henry Cooper's eyes closed again. "That explains it. Charley always left me with plenty of water and about a 30-day supply of food whenever he had to go off some place. But this time he didn't come back." He ran his tongue over his lips. "It was the water, you know. I didn't mind the food running out, but five days ago I drank the last of the water." He looked at me steadily. "It's all over, isn't it?"

"Sure," I said. "It's all over."

"And now you'll send me to jail?"

"Jail? Why jail?"

Henry Cooper sighed. "Because of the war, you know. When the draft notice came, my mother and I talked it over and we decided that I just wasn't the type who should be in the Army. And so we fixed up the attic room for me. Nobody but Mother knew I was there. Then later, when she wasn't feeling well, she had to tell cousin Charley. And when she died, cousin Charley took care of me."

Jackson frowned. "But you do know that the war is over, don't you?"

"Of course," Henry said. "Mother told me the day it ended. We celebrated with some floating island she'd secretly made. But I couldn't leave my room even then. I would still have been sent to prison for draft evasion."

"How long did you expect to stay in your room?" Jackson asked. "Forever?"

"Oh, no. Just until some sort of amnesty for draft evaders was declared. We knew that it would take time, but Charley was going to tell me just as soon as it happened."

Sergeant Nelson appeared in the hall outside the doorway. Jackson and I slipped out and joined him.

"What have you got?" I asked.

"Well," Nelson said, "this Charley Cooper who died in Florida owned the big house and a couple of million dollars besides. He got it all from his widowed aunt Mildred."

I rubbed my jaw. "Aunt? She willed it to him?"

"Not exactly. When she died, she left all the loot to her only son, Henry. The trouble was that Henry had disappeared three years earlier and he never did show up."

"So how did Charley get hold of the money?"

"He stepped forward as Aunt Mildred's only living relative. And to tie up any loose ends, a few years later he had Henry Cooper declared legally dead."

Jackson whistled softly. "So Charley had Henry sealed up in the little room while he ran wild with the inheritance? Why didn't he just kill Henry off? Or did his conscience stop just short of murder?"

Back in Henry's room, Jackson regarded the little man more sympathetically now. "So you stayed up in the room all those years and never left? What did you do to pass the time away?"

"I read," Henry said. "And worked out. And slept a lot."

Jackson shook his head unbelievably. "If it should happen to me, I'd at least have a TV put in and keep the sound low."

I studied Henry. Yes, I thought, 30 days without food and the dehydration can do a lot to change a man. I took out my notebook. "All right, Henry, let's get some order to this. When did you say your mother died?"

Henry thought a moment. "Three years after I went up to the room." He nodded to himself. "Yes, that's it. Three years. She died in 1921."

He turned to Jackson, his face puzzled. "What's TV?" he asked plaintively. Ω